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ABSTRACT

Creating a writing workshop atmosphere using computers in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom improves the opportunities for integrating all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The computer also represents a new way of learning, emphasizing students' problem solving strategies and learning processes. Teachers must remain sensitive to the newness and complexity of the technical demands on the ESL student, which may compound fears about speaking and writing English. If initial word processing activities are brief, nonthreatening, and not heavily constrained by time, students are encouraged to explore the program's capabilities and to use the computer as part of their writing process, not as a glorified typewriter. Students learning word processing must balance a multitude of interrelated, subtly coordinated, and self-motivated mental and physical activities requiring trial and error. Teachers must balance instructional concerns with the teaching of word processing until students have achieved a minimum level of competency. By using word processing, students become highly engaged in writing and learning language, gain new sensitivity to the flexibility of language, appear more receptive to feedback concerning the need for revision and editing, and improve their overall writing and language ability. (JD)

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Word Processing in the ESL Class: Integrating Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking Skills

The advantages of word processing for writers are numerous and well known: it makes it easier to catch the idea flow, to revise, and to edit. It makes language more fluid. It can encourage play with language. Writers can learn to mold and shape their writing until it reflects the subtle nuances of their thought. And, of course, the computer produces neater, more professional-looking manuscripts. Because it is easier to revise, writers are frequently less wedded to their texts, more open to the idea of change. I have used word processing to teach writing in several educational contexts: to high school students whom I researched for a year, to university students in an advanced writing course, and to junior college students in an intermediate reading/writing course in English as a Second Language. My focus today is on using word processing to teach non-native speakers an ESL course in reading/writing. In particular, I'll talk about creating a workshop atmosphere in the classroom where all the language skills--listening, speaking, reading and writing--become integrated.

Learning word processing, learning a foreign language, and learning to write all have several things in common. First, they are often anxiety-producing situations. Learning to use computers,

attempting to master a foreign language, and writing make many people feel awkward, nervous, and exposed. The vulnerable ego of some may be less hearty than others. All three--word processing, learning a foreign language, and learning to write--also share the limitation that once a learner gains a certain level of mastery in doing them, e.g. speaking the native language or writing using a pencil, there may be a strong reluctance to break with what works well to learn a new way, e.g. communicate in another language or write on a computer. The learner may feel childish and silly, perhaps even dumb.

In the enthusiastic rush to introduce computers into classrooms, advocates for the most part have failed to point out the difficulties encountered in these new learning environments. Yet teaching writing on computers is exploratory and experimental. The computer, because of its newness and complexity, demands of teachers new sensitivities to what is happening. Because it necessitates new technical skills on the part of the student and because it may overload and overwhelm some students, learning to word process makes writing more difficult and stressful for many students. Initially, it makes writing harder. This is not a contradiction of my earlier assertions about the ease of writing and revising on a computer, but simply the recognition that the ease comes <u>after</u> the mastery, or at least after some level of competence with the equipment and the program.

For the ESL student word processing may compound fears and concerns about speaking English and about writing in a second language with new anxieties about using the computer. Learning what keys to push and how to get out of trouble when you have

pushed the wrong keys interferes with one's writing process. The learner must come to terms with strange, new phenomena: writing that magically appears and disappears, that moves about in seemingly unpredictable ways, a machine that will not perform unless the command given to it is absolutely exact.

Some students are fearful of touching the equipment. They often request help and want to be told exactly what to do and when to do it. Even with this one-on-one help, they may freeze, their hands unable to press the keys. Some have difficulty remembering what to do. Others compare themselves unfavorably to what their classmates are doing and become distressed by what they perceive to be their easy successes. Frustrations for certain students can turn into avoidance behavior, including not coming to class regularly.

Some people deal much less well with frustration than others, and learning how to word process is frequently a frustrating experience, even when the program is supposedly easy to learn. When a complex program is used, the potential for problems increases. I asked a class of ESL writers, after they'd had 10 hours of word processing instruction in WordStar, to open a file called "Fun," write their name and two silly sentences, save it, then print it out. Since I reviewed all of the procedures with them, I did not anticipate serious difficulties. Yet the amount of stress one student was feeling is evident from her response:

> I don't know how to operate the computer. I am so scared. I know this is not funny at all. But some people might be thinking it is funny because it is so easy. They are doing so well, but I can't. Oh, my God what I am doing? I supose to write down a funny thing. I guess there is nothing in my mind except computer. I feel sorry myself.

The learning process appears to vary greatly from student to student for complex reasons. One factor is that students have heard, just as we have, about the computer's marvelous powers. They frequently believe that their future depends upon success with this machine.

Another factor is that the computer used as a tool, because it represents new ways of learning, emphasizes students' problem-solving strategies--or their lack of them--and makes their learning processes highly transparent. Students' learning becomes as exposed as their writing. Students need to be willing to admit they need help; yet in every class I notice a few students who are unable to do so. If the teacher does not seek them out and assist them, they sit for long periods of time incapable of functioning effectively. They worry about looking foolish, making mistakes, or breaking the equipment.

During the second week of a new term, I came across an ESL student at the end of class who was pushing keys and flipping from one menu in the word-processing program to another. I asked her what she wanted to do. She said she was trying to write. Students had been given numerous demonstrations and explanations, but she did not know how to get to where she could write. The lab assistant and I had been circulating, students had been encouraged to help each other, yet she had not asked anyone for help. I have learned to frequently ask students if they need help and to watch computer monitors and student body language for signs of trouble.

I try to initiate activities that help students get to know each other and feel comfortable working together. I encourage collaboration both in learning to use the computer equipment and in

learning to write. Since collaboration can greatly enrich ESL students oral language skills, I suggest that they use English at all times when they speak together. I also encourage exploration and experimentation--both in the use of the computer hardware and software and in writing--by emphasising the process rather than the product of writing, especially at the beginning of the course. This helps to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety.

The first activities I give students to do on the computers are focused on word processing rather than writing. Demonstrations accompanied by oral explanations on using the computer are supplemented with printed information and simple activities for students to do. They also receive command cards with concise listings of the program's commands. I have learned not to assume that students will automatically be able to read and follow instructions, whether from a card or the computer monitor. I teach students where to find the information, what it means, and take them through the steps of the process repeatedly until they can successfully do it on their own. As the students progress in their ability to use the program, I introduce parts of the manual as teaching and reference aids.

Rather than long essays, students' first word-processing activities are brief. My assumption is that mistakes made on texts of little significance make it easier for students to endure the usual frustrations involved in learning how to use a computer. My intention is to encourage students to explore the program's capabilities, an important part of learning how to word process. Certainly making a mistake, even completely losing a file, is less upsetting when it took only ten minutes to write it, than when it

is a piece of writing that has been written and revised over several days.

I create short, non-threatening activities to give students practice in reading and following directions as well as in using the essential features of the word-processing program. Students may be given a sentence-combining activity to do on the computer, a cloze passage to fill in, or sentences that require a minor modification such as words that need to be capitalized. Students are encouraged to ask me and each other for assistance when they need it. Those who do not know how to type learn where the keys are located and some of the typing conventions, such as the need to space after a comma and how to produce upper-case letters. The process of beginning and ending writing on the computer becomes familiar to them. They learn how to do it successfully while completing a series of short writing tasks. They make their blunders and discoveries on inconsequential pieces of text and they gain increased confidence as they learn how to successfully troubleshoot problems.

In the beginning I do not expect that students will be able to print out their weekly assignments from the computer. I want them to use the computer as part of their writing process, and they do, but I tell them not to worry if they must finish their papers at home in pen or at the typewriter. This strategy is intended to reduce their stress and to accommodate their various rates and styles of learning. Some students exhibit a strong reluctance to interact with the computer. Demands made too early that their finished writing be a printout, may prevent them from using the computer as a composing tool and force them instead into using the

computer as a glorified typewriter to recopy work written using traditional methods. An approach that is too rigid and demanding may scare some students away from using the computer at all. Other constraints must also be taken into consideration before too many course demands regarding the use of the computer are made. How much access time do students have to use the computer outside of class? If there is little or no opportunity to use the computer except during the class, the teacher cannot reasonably expect students to carry out most of their writing process at the computer.

Of course, some students take readily to using the computer. They confidently explore it, compose on it, and conquer it right away. They seem not to experience the same fears and problems of some of the others. They learn to word process with a minimum of discomfort, quickly becoming zealous converts. They appear almost instinctively to acquire an interactive flexibility, learning what they need to know as they go along. They use the available resources to assist them: the teacher, the lab assistant, and the other students; the directions on the screen; class handouts or the program's manual; and they learn from their experiences using the program.

Even for these students, however, time constraints and other impediments may make it necessary early in the semester for them to revise their printed copies in pen and write the final version by hand. Others bring to class rough drafts in various stages of completion and edit them as they key them in. Still others, even several weeks into the course, continue to struggle with the program's basic commands and procedures as they attempt to complete

the earliest and simpliest assignments. It is important that all students have ample time to get comfortable using the electronic equipment before it has consequences on their writing and their class grade.

The teacher needs to work at establishing a comfortable climate in the room, a workshop atmosphere, where students feel free to risk making mistakes and helping each other learn together. I believe a sharing, workshop atmosphere is important in helping students reduce their initial levels of anxiety and in giving everyone a chance to have a positive experience working on the computer. Once the right classroom rapport exists, students will be more willing to take chances; they will be ready to take the risks necessary to learn. This workshop atmosphere also helps tremendously in integrating the important language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

One of the reasons, among other things, that makes this teaching so complex is that learning how to word process is like learning how to ride a bike. The user balances a multitude of interrelated, subtly coordinated, mental and physical activities requiring trial and error. While someone may assist, the learner must do most of the job of learning him or herself. Some aspects of the process may be presented in discrete steps for the student to follow in a linear way, but for the most part word processing, which is a recursive and interactive activity, cannot be completely taught in a step-by-step fashion. Therefore, the teacher should work at creating a good environment and getting students off to a good start, so they will be properly bolstered to take risks and to play an active role. The writing teacher becomes something of a

coach.

One clear advantage at the end of this learning process is that the student, beyond learning a particular program, learns the process of learning, the art of interacting with the computer, learns to learn within the word processing program's "rules." Since perhaps the only thing we can be certain of in this era of rapid, technolgical change is that the computer software and hardware our students use today will not be what they will use tomorrow, even if the problems of compatibility are some day worked out, this is a critical point. One of the most important things we have to teach our computer-using writers is that mastery of a word-processing program requires a willingness to interact, to explore, and to experiment. Teachers need to reassure students that they cannot break the machine and that there is no such thing as a mistake; errors are to learn by.

The teacher juggles a multitude of concerns. There are the technical problems as well as worries about how to integrate the writing process. Too much emphasis on writing per se in the early stages when students are coping with the technology is ill-advised, yet the goal is to teach language and writing, not just word processing. How to balance the instructional concerns with the teaching of word processing until the student has achieved a minimum level of competency becomes the teacher's dilemma.

I try to resist making the assumption that my writing process should be the students'. Since little is known about teaching writing with word processing the temptation to impose one's own method is strong. Writing teachers whose mastery of word processing may be rudimentary, sometimes tell their students that

the computer should be used only for revisions, since that is the way they use it, or that print-outs of a piece in progress should be made regularly. However, many students learn to compose directly on the computer, with or without the help of notes, and some rarely make print-outs until they feel their writing is finished.

The bottom line in using word processing, of course, is--does the student's writing and overall language ability improve? This, of course, is not a simple question to answer. When students make progress, much more than just the computer is involved. The strategies of the teacher; the learning environment; the student's background, motivation, and effort are just a few of the elements that enter into success or failure. Clearly some students become highly engaged by writing and language learning when word processing is used. They gain new sensitivity to the flexibility of language, become willing--even eager--to write, and appear more receptive to feedback concerning the need to do revision and editing since this no longer entails a great deal of extra work.

With teacher encouragement the ESL class may become more social and collaborative which means that students' language skills and writing benefit from suggestions made by both peers and teacher. While there is still much more for us to learn about the process of teaching using word processors, it appears safe to say they change the ESL class. Even when the focus is primarily on writing, creating a writing workshop using computers in the ESL classroom improves the opportunities for integrating all of the language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It holds forth the promise of providing an effective way of helping

students improve their mastery of a second language.